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ABSTRACT

In 1996, Minnesota's Anoka Ramsey Community College (ARCC) participated in the Exploring America's Communities project sponsored by the American Association of Community Colleges. The project works to strengthen the teaching and learning of American History, literature, and culture at U.S. community colleges. The grant application from the ARCC team specified three areas for action: inclusion of concepts of pluralism and identity into teaching and activities, development of an interdisciplinary course, and organizing a series of Internet-based conversations for ethnically diverse student bodies. The major accomplishments to date can be divided into two categories: communicating the program's efforts to the college community and hosting events. Bringing faculty into the project was accomplished by one-on-one meetings, and a newsletter maintaining the presence of the subject for faculty and administrators was started. A week-long screening of the video "Exploring America's Communities Teleconference" was presented. Following the film, discussions on the subjects of community and identity were held. Additionally, a pair of workshops were held to discuss curriculum changes. Future projects under development include an Internet link-up, which will enlarge student-to-student communication. Faculty are also making substantial progress in curriculum transformation, and team members will continue to supply them with resources and encouragement. (HAA)

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Anoka Ramsey Community College
Exploring America's Communities Progress Report

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In: National Conference on American Pluralism and Identity Program Book
(New Orleans, LA, January 18-19, 1997)

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Anoka Ramsey Community College
Coon Rapids Campus

EXPLORING AMERICA'S COMMUNITIES
PROGRESS REPORT

Anoka-Ramsey Community College, established in 1965, overlooks a bend in the Mississippi River twenty miles upstream from the heart of Minneapolis, located on the northern edges of the metropolitan area. The college's sense of place is bifurcated: to the north and west are farms and forests; to the south and east, urban areas. Most typically blue-collar and rural in makeup, the counties of Anoka and Ramsey contribute most of the 9,000 students who annually take classes at the college's two campuses. The college's function has traditionally been to provide for transfer and general education, with over 800 students receiving associate of arts degrees annually. Those students have been predominately white and of northern European descent. Recently, however, the college's minority enrollment has grown from 2% (mostly native American) to over 5% (increasing numbers of Asian and African refugees). An area in transition, it is anchored by the city of Anoka, the hometown of Garrison Keillor and considered by most to be the model for the mythical Lake Woebegone.

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The grant application from the ARCC team specified three areas for action: a series of faculty workshop to result in grass-roots level curriculum transformation through inclusion of concepts of pluralism and identity into day-to-day teaching and activities; the development of an interdisciplinary course as an outgrowth of that curricular change; and a series of Internet conversations for students with an ethnically different student body, a kind of partnership through technology. The overarching goal of the team was to infuse teaching and learning in such a way that study and discussions about American pluralism and identity would become fundamental to the course fabric, not add-ons that could be arbitrarily snipped off. The team hoped to make pluralism as obvious an issue as has become writing across the curriculum and non-sexist language. A secondary goal was to bring the importance of this project to the awareness of all faculty, not just those in literature, history, and the humanities.

The major accomplishments to date can be categorized in two types: communications and events. A questionnaire went out to all faculty, delineating a series of activities and inviting participation. Data were maintained by the team members and used for personal contact with the respondents when events were planned. Team members believed strongly that the success of the project rested on bringing faculty into the project and that this could be best accomplished by one-on-one

persuasion. Blanket invitations are too easy to ignore. Indeed, dissemination of information was so successful and pervasive that the term "Pluralism Project" has become a common part of campus' vocabulary. A presentation to the President' Council, a group of college managers, was given, and they reaffirmed their support. Distribution of the project newsletter "*Pluralism and Common Ground: Community at Anoka-Ramsey*" maintained the presence of the subject for faculty and administrators through five issues. The sixth issue, at press for January, will provide faculty members with resource materials as they plan syllabi for winter quarter: books, journal articles, movies and videos, and listings of area concerts, plays, and art exhibits with pluralistic focuses.

The first successful activity for the Pluralism Project was in the spring, a week-long screening of the AACC video "*Exploring America's Communities Teleconference*" followed by an hour of conversation on subjects of community and identity generated by the video. Over seventy faculty, students, and staff took part in these discussions on such issues as the nature of the college community and its roots, the various identities that members of the community see, and our own attachments to place. An initial workshop was held, before the closing of the spring term, for faculty and team members to decide together ways in which the curriculum could be changed. At the opening convocation for the fall term, the Pluralism Project had an opportunity to present a status report to

the faculty and to solicit participation for the year's activities. Team members asked for a Year of Exploring Community, in which the transformation of the curriculum would begin. In October, a highly successful day of activities with mentor Max Reichard included two faculty workshops and a brown bag lunch with the college community. In November, team members led a second workshop on developing an interdisciplinary course, integrating ideas that had come about as a result of Dr. Reichard's visit to ARCC. During the whole of this period, team members met weekly to strategize for the future and to evaluate past activities. As a result of the Pluralism Project's "institutionalization," the chair of the college Cultural Diversity Committee met with the group and told them that the their group had disbanded because the broad scope of the project had subsumed the need for another committee. Consequently, the team members took on the role of leading Diversity Dialogues with students and staff that had previously been a function of the former diversity committee.

As with many endeavors, much may be accomplished but more remains to be done. ARCC's team members found that they had charted a very ambitious course and that such college issues as an accreditation report and visit, the mandate to convert from quarters to semesters, and the loss of deans of both student services and academic affairs meant less time and fewer participants for "peripheral activities." Many faculty

feel they are so deeply committed to these college-wide problems that they have little time to spare. Nonetheless, the involvement of almost 100 individuals from the campus community in project activities must be seen as significant, and team members view such statistics positively. The project will work to develop the Internet link-up, and the student-to-student conversation will enlarge and continue. Faculty have made substantial progress in curriculum transformation, and as they rewrite courses for conversion from quarters to semesters, there will be a place on the common course outline for them to include information on how the subjects of pluralism and identity will be addressed in their courses. Team members will continue to supply them with the resources and the encouragement to implement these ideas.

One response by students and colleagues to the questions posed in the conversations has been an acknowledgment of the importance of these issues. But perhaps the most gratifying response has been the interest with which participants have approached the topic of community: how to define it, how it shapes us, how much we need it. This response has grown out of a consensus that there are more things that bring us together than divide us, that we have more commonalties than difference. In one conversation, a young white supremacist engaged in dialogue with representatives of that "multiculturalism" he was so contemptuous of, and the result was at least détente, if not agreement.

The very fact of the conversation was in itself a very powerful tribute to the efficacy of the Pluralism Project at Anoka-Ramsey Community College.